

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 26, 2009

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton:

We are writing to you today to express the urgent need for common-sense reforms that would make it easier for Western New Yorkers to obtain valid documentation and prevent a loss of trade and travel when the next phase of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) is implemented on June 1, 2009. On this date, passports or enhanced drivers' licenses are scheduled to be required for all land-crossings into and out of the country.

Every day, tens of thousands of Western New Yorkers head into and out of Canada at one of four locations – the Rainbow, Whirlpool, Peace, and Lewiston-Queenston bridges. These four points combine to make the Buffalo-Niagara border crossing the most heavily trafficked on the entire, 4,000 mile-long U.S.-Canadian border. It is the fourth most-trafficked border crossing in the entire United States. Many of our constituents visit friends and family members on a regular basis on both sides of the border. Countless good-paying jobs are tied to cross-border commerce and despite the global economic downturn; U.S.-bound traffic is on the rise in part due to the strength of the Canadian dollar.

Of course, having ably represented New Yorkers in the U.S. Senate for eight years, you understand as well as anyone the impact the Initiative is having on our region. In fact, in a May 22, 2007 letter to your predecessor, Secretary Rice, you stated that “at the root of the Initiative's problems are the cost and the burden it would impose on United States citizen travelers.” We could not agree more.

As you know, passport fees can run a family of four close to \$400, a substantial sum at any time, but understandably prohibitive during this economic crisis. That why we have introduced H.R. _____, the Passport Fee Relief Act of 2009, which will create a tax credit to help with the cost of obtaining a passport or other WHTI-compliant documents.

Even if we can provide some relief with the cost aspect, however, our constituents will still face significant logistical hurdles in obtaining a passport. The closest issuance agency is located in downtown Manhattan, a seven-hour drive even with little or no traffic. Technically, the new passport agency in Detroit is closer, but ironically, the easiest way for a Western New Yorker to get to the Motor City is through Canada.

Over the years, federal, state and local officials have worked together to expedite constituents' passport applications in an emergency and raise local awareness about changes in border policies and the WHTI. These efforts have helped many in our region.

There is simply no substitute, however, for a fully-staffed issuance agency that can turn around a passport in just hours, as opposed to the weeks-long wait that accompanies applications filed by mail.

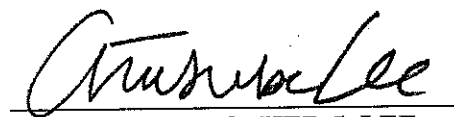
That is why, in light of the Administration's intent to implement the next phase of the Initiative on June 1st, we are requesting that you immediately open a provisional passport agency in the Buffalo-Niagara region. With just one-in-four Americans currently possessing a passport, the potential for confusion among residents and travelers is simply too great for our region to go without a one-stop shop for expedited documents.

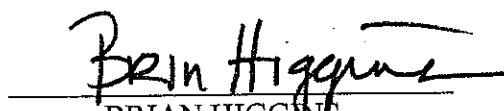
Regardless of whether the Initiative is implemented on schedule, Buffalo is well past due for a permanent issuance agency. For one thing, Canada is New York's primary export market, with \$28.5 billion worth of merchandise and goods exchanged in 2007. Additionally, New York and Canada boast the largest bilateral tourism industry in the U.S., with citizens from both crossing the border an average of 11,343 times daily. Finally, it is curious that an issuance agency has just opened its doors in Detroit when the Buffalo/Niagara crossings took on more traffic during the last fiscal year (13.5 million just by car) than Detroit and Port Huron, MI combined (12.2 million).

Like you, we are committed to ensuring that U.S.-Canada border crossings remain both safe and convenient for our citizens. It is our hope that given your past leadership on WHTI you will assist in expediting this request. We look forward to working with you in good faith to strike the right balance between our security needs and our economic imperatives.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,


CHRISTOPHER J. LEE
Member of Congress


BRIAN HIGGINS
Member of Congress